

## **Contributions of State Departments of Education in Early Childhood Program/Services Coordination: A Position Paper of the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education**

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Early childhood is a new area of concern for public policy and questions surround the kind of services which should be provided for young children, who should provide them, and how they should be administered. This paper represents the viewpoint of education specialists who work at the state level of government in states with varying degrees of past, present and future commitment to serve young children.

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### **Overview**

First a rationale is developed for why early childhood is broader than a focus on young children and must necessarily encompass those who interact with children most closely. Next, the components of service within a community which should be available for the young child and those in contact with that child is discussed. Following this, the services needed at higher levels of government are addressed and the need for coordination among programs and services. Next, the state department of education is analyzed as an agency with a contribution to make to coordination at the state level. Then the paper shifts back to the local level again to present a discussion of the implications of early childhood programs and services being offered through public schools. Finally, the writers of this position paper make a statement about their encouragement of the expansion of programs and services for children and families within the public schools, their commitment to making these services strong, flexible and responsive, and their intent to model within their own state education agencies the type of coordination of services that is needed among agencies for the effective delivery of programs and services.

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### **Introduction**

Early childhood in its broadest sense encompasses the years from birth through age eight. A child grows and develops foundational skills of living and learning in these years and forms attitudes toward self and others that influence behavior throughout life. This period when a child's social, emotional, physical and intellectual capacities are in their most formative, impressionable stages is also one in which the child's dependence on others is greatest.

It is necessary not only to focus on the development of every child to the fullest potential, but also to provide support and assistance to those who are in continual contact with the child. By developing the skills and capacities of parents, older children, and adults, as they plan for and interact with young children, society is more assured that young children benefit from relationships with others which best reflect the knowledge about the critical importance of the early years for the total development of the human being.

Sidney Bijou has suggested an interactional model of early childhood. It is a model with continuous interaction between the biologically developing child and the progressive changes in

the child's environment. These interactions change both the child and the environment. The social environment both shapes the child and is shaped by the child's developing personality. This interaction model reflects the dynamic quality of what happens to both children and families in the early years of the child's development. It helps to explain why early childhood is not a field which is able to concern itself exclusively with children who are young; it must of necessity encompass those important social influences of the child's environment: families, other children and adults.

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### **Components of Early Childhood Services**

Early childhood is concerned with all aspects of the young child's development and learning. Comprehensive early childhood services may include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- Identification, screening, diagnosis and treatment services for health needs, and developmental assessment
- Educational programs for infants and young children
- Health and nutritional services for infants and young children
- Health and educational services for minority children, children with handicaps and children with special needs
- Social services for children experiencing child abuse or neglect, as well as children in need of adoption or foster care
- Services for children in need of care outside the home for part of the day.

Because an interactional model is needed in early childhood, services are not focused just on the young child but must also include services to parents, older children and other adults including:

- Prenatal health and education services for expectant parents
- Social services including family planning and homemaker services
- Health and education programs for new and experienced parents
- Health and education programs for children, adolescents and adults who are potential parents
- Family counseling in areas such as genetics, child development, family stress
- Job training for persons interested in careers with young children
- Mental health services.

### **A Comprehensive Approach to Services for Young Children and Families**

Coordination needs to exist both in the administration and in the delivery of services. Policy decisions must reflect the fact that social, economic, scientific, educational and environmental factors enhance or limit the developing potential of each individual. This requires policy planning that is holistic, multidisciplinary, multidimensional, and based on cooperative decision-making.

Efforts to improve opportunities for young children and to strengthen the family as a basic unit of our society must be planned and implemented on a systematic basis. A coordinated, comprehensive program of services for children and families should be:

- Responsive to needs of various regions and the diversity of local values and resources
- Preventative and supportive in orientation
- Provided on a continuing basis
- Available to all members of the community on a voluntary basis
- Free of discrimination and segregation in all facets.

A system for directing the planning and management of the program and services is needed along with technical assistance for local level delivery of services. Comprehensive services should have a system for:

- Collecting data and identifying needs
- Planning to meet needs
- Involving the concerned public
- Providing a full-range of manpower trained in human services
- Developing program operating standards to establish minimums
- Providing leadership to promote multiple, unique service programs of high quality
- Disseminating information
- Providing on-going evaluation of services.

Responsibility for the broad spectrum of services involved in a comprehensive approach to services for young children and families is vested at the state level in many different agencies. Government policy decisions at the state and federal levels create agency responsibilities through legislation. Funding sources are determined by legislation and create flow-through monies for a particular agency to administer. The carrying out of legislative mandates limits the state agencies in their responsiveness to coordination efforts. No single agency in any state provides all of the needed services under one administrative structure.

While cooperation is difficult, the lack of a coordinating mechanism creates its own problems in:

- Duplication of services
- Fragmentation of services
- Inequality of services throughout the state.

Because of rising costs, human service programs increasingly find they must cut back on established programs. It becomes essential for a new program, such as early childhood, to make the best use of the limited funds that are and will be available.

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### **The Contribution of the State Department of Education in Early Childhood Coordination**

Since all persons of every age, economic level, intellectual and social capacity need education, the education agency should represent the most universal of services. The state education agency provides leadership, service and regulatory functions in relation to the local education agencies. Although the administrative organization of state education agencies differs from state to state, there are common, general services that are provided by most state departments of education to local school districts.

#### Organization and Administration of Schools:

- School plant: Guidance in planning facilities and maintenance of standards
- School transportation
- School nutrition
- School finance

#### Curriculum and Instruction for Schools:

- Curriculum development
- Teacher/administrator inservice
- General education
- Special education
- Compensatory education
- Community education
- Vocational education

- Computer-assisted instruction
- Support Services to Schools:
  - Social work, nursing, psychological and counseling services
  - Library/Media services
  - Legal counsel
  - Legislative relations
- Communication:
  - Public information and dissemination
  - Computer systems for collection and retrieval of data
  - Professional library access systems to research
- Planning and Development:
  - Assessment strategies
  - Planning guidance
  - Evaluation processes
- Professional Development:
  - Review of higher education preparation programs
  - Teacher licensure
  - Continuing education for teachers.

These general capacities of state departments of education are consistent with many of the service needs that have been identified for a comprehensive early childhood program. These services would be required for growth of programs for young children and families. The state education agency has an established delivery system and support system.

However, the present specific capacity of most state departments of education as it relates to early childhood programs is not great. Expansion of services would necessitate setting this as a priority and beginning to provide for growth in a systematic way through assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation of new services and programs. It would require increased human and monetary resources as well as planned efforts of coordination on an intraagency level. This necessary expansion, however, would still be less of an investment than creating a separate department or agency for early childhood.

Public monies must be administered through a public agency. To set up a new agency for early childhood would be to expend public monies for many additional administrative costs that are far removed from service needs. The state department of education has demonstrated a capacity to administer large and complicated state and federal programs. The state department of education is accountable to the legislature and to the citizens of the state. It is an agency governed by a policy-making board.

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### **An Idealistic and Realistic Look at the Implementation of Programs for Children in the Public Schools**

Access for all children. The public school is available to all persons in the community, regardless of any special characteristics of the receiver of service. Services are presently being provided to special groups of preschool children: handicapped, minority groups, bilingual, low-income, educationally handicapped, and gifted.

All children are not presently receiving equal access to the opportunities of a public education. Special legislation for handicapped children has been developed. Desegregation guidelines are being implemented in schools through court order. There is a network of systems to help schools move toward the ideal of being free of discrimination and segregation in all facets of their operation.

Outreach and information sharing. All agencies have a problem of outreach to make their services known. It is difficult for the consumer to know what services are available and where. Since the local education agency is the only agency with a legal or mandated responsibility for contact with each child of compulsory school attendance age, it provides a logical place in the community for an information system to parents about available services for children and families. Public schools also have a legal responsibility for collecting school census data; this provides a contact system that is already organized.

Realistically, the public school is new to serving a population on a voluntary basis. While most programs in public school settings are compulsory for the majority of children, the strategies for encouraging participation in voluntary programs is a new role for public schools.

Coordination of existing services. Many or most public schools are presently providing support and referral services to school-age children in the areas of health, nutrition, counseling, diagnostic services and social services. By serving as a coordinating agency for services to younger children, the public school would become the referral place for the same spectrum of services, but for a wider age range of children. Screening services, for example, are already occurring in many public school settings. Since the early identification of children with special needs is critical to their total development, it is important that there be coordination of follow-up services among existing agencies.

Realistically, budget cuts tend to affect the support services of the school before other services. It is essential that the quality of comprehensive services be maintained by public school as they face years of declining enrollment and budget problems.

Administration of funds. The public schools represent a public agency which is accountable to both parents and the public in their communities. The public schools are operated by policy-making boards which are elected by the citizens of the community. The public schools have shown that they can administer large sums of money and operate a variety of programs.

Home-school relationships. Educational services to young children need to involve the parents and family as much as possible. Research results have indicated that a sustained impact on the life of a young child can most effectively occur when those who are most continuously in contact with the child, the family members, are given support and assistance to enhance the early development of the child. Early contact and communication between public school personnel and families can build bridges of understanding between home and school that facilitate the child's development and success in learning.

It cannot be said, realistically, that schools have always seen families as equal partners in the education of young children. It is, however, essential that the child should not be left without the support of significant adults who will work for new understandings between each other.

Child care. In the past, child care services have been carried out largely in the private sector; however, states are reporting increasing numbers of child care programs for both preschool and school-age children in the public schools. The provision of this service in public schools can enhance the physical facility standards for most programs. The school is often the focal point in the community; the buildings reflect the community's pride in providing services for its youth.

By making child care available in the public schools, concerns of the working parents for the care of their school-age and preschool children can be met in a single location. Programs in schools allow child care participants to eat breakfast and lunch in a place where nutritious meals are planned. Realistically, it has been recognized that schools serve societal needs for day care through the six-hour school day. By accepting this reality, the schools will increase their capacity to define their role more broadly and to meet more of the need of children.

Preparation of personnel. The public schools have a system for establishing staff qualifications for those who work with children. It is essential that well-qualified teachers of young children work in the public schools. Qualified personnel in the public schools would insure that child development knowledge which is available would be utilized in developing programs which are suited to children's developmental levels and which take into consideration the tremendous growth and learning potential of the child in the early years.

While there is concern in the private sector that those in public schools with little interest in young children will become their teachers through a seniority system that moves to provide work for tenured teachers, the qualifications to work with young children are different from teachers who work with school-age children. Programs for retraining or continuing education of personnel would need to be implemented to prepare elementary school teachers to work with young children. However, it is realistic to think that experience in teaching older children would make one fit for retraining to work with young children. Teachers working with young children need both formal preparation and experience to do this; they need to be at least as qualified, if not more qualified, as teachers of older children.

Continuity. The need for continuity of experiences for children has been the finding of longitudinal research programs funded by federal monies through the Office of Child Development. Head Start, which essentially operated outside the public schools, was extended experimentally into Follow Through programs in public schools to sustain gains. Continuity of experience can be provided by developing early childhood programs in public schools. This would provide for continuity of environment, teaching staff, peers, and family influence as well as program continuity through similar curriculum and developmental approaches.

Realistically, the concern that educators of young children have with this approach is the worry that what is worst in public education, the lockstep progress in instruction, the back-to-the-basics emphasis on skill development in reading and-mathematics could be thrust downward with greater achievement expectations for ever younger children. Continuity within a desirable, developmental curriculum approach is excellent; continuity of bad instructional techniques or curriculum content would be a possible danger.

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### **Public School Programs for Parents, Families, Older Children and Adults**

Approaches in early childhood directed toward parents, families, older children and other adults do not have as long a tradition in public education nor have they been the concern of groups in the private sector. Because these programs are new, they are seen positively by most people.

Education for parenthood. Study of young children and "hands on" experiences with them are quite common in junior and senior high schools. Parenting is no longer seen as something that will be a natural development in the individual upon the birth of a child. Instead, it is seen as an important area of study for young persons who are family members now and potential parents in the future. Child development centers for the child and family provide excellent practicum settings for adolescents when they are housed in the school. Secondary students have opportunities then to learn parenting skills from young families as well as from teachers.

Adult education. Adult education programs and community education programs are beginning to reflect the important role of the adult as parent. Such programs are already occurring in school settings and are sponsored by the schools. Classes and discussion groups are bringing new parents into contact with other fathers and mothers who can strengthen and support their understanding and skill in interacting with young children. Again, these programs bring a spread of socioeconomic levels and educational backgrounds into schools where all the community will share the resources equally.

Occupational training in child care services. Post-secondary programs operated by the public schools are preparing adults for work roles as paraprofessionals who can interact effectively with children of a variety of ages and developmental levels.

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## **Conclusion**

The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education endorses and encourages the expansion and growth of programs for young children and families within the public schools. We feel that there are inherent strengths and weaknesses in every system that attempts to provide a wide range of services to a diverse group of people. We see the strengths in our own educational system and we will dedicate ourselves to work toward making that system strong, flexible and responsive. We feel that through the coordinated efforts of those in state departments of education, a wide spectrum of the services needed by young children and families will be realized.

We will work toward building better linkages of communication and service delivery within our own system. We will encourage our own departments of education to coordinate the services and programs that are presently administered through our agencies. We will seek to model within our own agency the interagency type of cooperation and planning that will be needed by our states to pull together the network of services and programs that constitute comprehensive early childhood.